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ABSTRACT

This paper contends that domestic response to John F. Kennedy's assassination took two basic forms in the United States: active crisis management and retreat. According to the paper, while government, churches, and the media engaged in active crisis management, businesses and schools closed, and the public retreated to mourn rather than to contribute to the public dialogue over the assassination, becoming instead receivers of guidance. The paper discusses the American shutdown after the assassination and the mindset it created. It then examines the reaction of the sports world in relation to this pattern of retreat and withdrawal, focusing on the Illinois-Michigan State football game, a game which was finally postponed at the very last minute. Through this example, it is argued that while the schools sought to avoid controversy by following the national trend, they created other problems by their actions and justifications and contributed little to the healing of the nation. The paper concludes that had the game gone ahead as originally scheduled, rationalized with arguments based on tribute and emotions, the Illinois-Michigan State contest may have been played without the excessive controversy that accompanied it. Contains 48 references. (NKA)

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College Football and Public Crisis: Appropriate Actions and Justifications after the Kennedy Assassination

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Domestic response to John F. Kennedy's assassination took two basic forms in the United States: active crisis management and retreat. Government, churches, and the media engaged in active crisis management. These institutions provided interpretations of the assassination aimed at facilitating national recovery. Other social institutions and the public at large retreated to mourn the death of the President, closing down businesses and schools on Friday afternoon and spending the weekend searching for answers. These groups chose to withdraw rather than contribute to the public dialogue over the assassination, becoming instead receivers of guidance.

In this paper, I briefly discuss the American shutdown after the assassination and the mindset it created. I then examine the reaction of the sports world in relationship to this pattern of retreat and withdrawal, focusing on the Illinois-Michigan State football game. Through this example, I argue that while the schools sought to avoid controversy by following the national trend, they created other problems by their actions and justifications. Also, by withdrawing from the crisis they contributed little to the healing of the nation.

Mourning Through Withdrawal

While President Johnson designated Monday as the official day of mourning, a spontaneous period of national mourning began immediately after Friday's announcement of President Kennedy's death. This mourning was represented by an almost ubiquitous shutdown of society.

The withdrawal of the nation began when the news broke around noontime on Friday, November 22. As James D. Barber observed, people reacted to the news of the assassination with shock, horror, and grief, as well as the desire for more information (112). Moreover, they sought privacy to sort out their feelings and otherwise deal with such an extraordinary event. In Boston, "[v]irtually every aspect of community life was at a standstill" (Kennedy's, 5). In New York City, "shock and sorrow for the murdered President darkened and silenced midtown Manhattan" (Doty, 1). United Press International reporter Walter Logan reported that "[b]usiness came to a standstill as people clustered around radio sets to hear again and again what they could not believe" (1b). Stock exchanges were closed down early as markets plunged (Stock Market's, 1). Conferences around the nation, such as the Midwest Governor's Conference in Omaha, the Republican National Conference in St. Louis, and the Texas Farmer's Union in Lubbock, were all immediately dismissed (Ohl, 3). Groups both pro- and anti-Kennedy responded in kind, as civil rights leaders halted demonstrations at businesses in Atlanta while pro-segregationists in Mobile, Alabama, canceled their function with the state's governor (Ohl, 3). Logan reports that nationally, "Theaters, movie houses, schools, business houses closed in almost every city" (1b). According to the National Opinion Research Center poll, fifty-four percent of respondents reported that they ceased all of their usual activities and five out of six of those people went immediately to a radio or television (Sheatsley and Feldman, 154).

The trend continued through the weekend. New York's Broadway

theaters were closed out of respect for the President (Ohl, 3). The United Nations closed for the first time in its history (Bigart, 9). Mayors and governors across the country expanded Johnson's period of mourning to include the whole weekend (Massena, 13). The governors of New Jersey, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania ordered all banks to be closed (Bigart, 9). In some areas, even restaurants and food stores closed down for much of the day, not opening until evening (City Pauses, 1). Headlines from around the country all echoed the same sentiments: "Death News Stuns Downtown Lincoln Into Silence" (Stuckey, 12), "Nation's Activities Curbed in Mourning" (Ohl, 3), "Tears Fall as Washington Comes to Shuddering Halt" (Winfrey, 19a), "The Muted City [New York]: Children Gambol" (Benjamin, 8). The three television networks canceled all regular programs and advertising in order to focus on news coverage of the weekend's tragedy (Val Adams, 25). It was even reported that criminal activity was "subdued" by the assassination mourning (Law-breakers, 5). In total, "millions of Americans halted their normal weekend activities to mourn their president" (Ohl, 3).

This national shutdown reinforced the expectation that the proper way to show respect for President Kennedy and his family was to stop normal activity. Unless it could be justified as essential, such as the operations of the federal government or news services, the country basically shut down. Especially prominent in the shutdown were sources of entertainment, such as television and theater, which were voluntarily closed quickly as news of the assassination spread. It was difficult to justify having fun in light of the tragedy.

A full slate of college football games was to be played on Saturday, many scheduled to begin less than twenty-four hours after the announcement of the President's shooting. Decisions about holding these sporting events needed to be made quickly. The National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA], the governing body of college sport, issued a simple statement which left the decision to the individual institutions, but urged the games to continue. "Whereas the decision rests with your institution and your opponent," began the statement by NCAA executive secretary Walter Byers, "it is our view that you should plan to proceed with your contest with an appropriate, dignified opening ceremony and with whatever other memorial tribute you might think appropriate at halftime" (NCAA, 31). With a vague edict such as this, it was reported that "college officials -- in most cases the presidents -- conferred by telephone on whether to go ahead" (Cady, 33). In the majority of decisions, cancelation won out.

According to the Chicago Tribune, "President Kennedy's alma mater, Harvard, led the way in the mass postponement and cancelation of sport events" by calling off the 80th annual Harvard-Yale spectacle "a few minutes after the President's assassination" (Set Ol' Oaken, 2). A joint message from the Presidents of these two schools declared that "Out of respect for the memory of the late President . . . we have decided that the athletic and social activities involving Harvard and Yale Universities which were scheduled shall not take place this weekend" (Cady, 33). This established the precedent that most other colleges followed over the next forty-eight hours. This trend appeared to mirror public sentiment across the country. One newspaper

report recorded that in "Charlotte, S.C., a local radio station was flooded with calls demanding cancellation of the 61st annual Clemson-South Carolina game. 'What do we have to cheer about?' a South Carolina cheerleader asked" (Logan, 1). In total, according to the lists published in the New York Times, 55 of 87 college football games were either postponed or canceled. Yet, not all of the game cancelations were handled in the same manner, sometimes causing confusion and anger for a public already upset over the President's assassination.

The case study examined here was chosen for the importance of the game and because it generated a wealth of public reactions. These criteria were used in order to select a sports event which could provide the greatest amount of material for examination. It is only natural that games featuring longstanding rivals battling for a bowl berth would generate more interest and national coverage than games of lesser importance. I selected the Illinois-Michigan State because it could provide the greatest amount of dialogue and debate, which in turn would support this research with the greatest amount of different variables and perspectives.

Illinois-Michigan St.

Not all colleges reacted as quickly as Harvard and Yale to cancel their games. While the rest of the Big Ten Presidents acted quickly in postponing their games, the game between Michigan State and Illinois was to go on as scheduled. Not until Saturday morning, just hours before kickoff, did President John Hannah of host Michigan State

announced that the game had been pushed back to Thanksgiving Day. This late decision, as can be expected, set off a wave of public controversy over the place of football during crisis.

The biggest game of the Big 10 football season came down to the final contest between Illinois and Michigan State. The winner of this game would claim the Big 10 championship and the automatic bid to the Rose Bowl. Host Michigan State University was abuzz with excitement. Thursday night before the game groups of students numbering in the thousands swarmed all over campus in an informal rally ('Go' Fever, 1). An official pep rally, entitled "Illiminate the Illini," was scheduled for Friday (Illiminate, 1). At the game itself, scheduled to kick-off at 1:30 Saturday afternoon, a sell-out crowd of 76,000 people was expected. Over 2,000 people were hired to handle the fans and stadium activities (Moskal, 1c). Nationally, the event had been tabbed "The Game of the Week" (Frazier, 1f).

The assassination of President Kennedy put the playing of the game into question. The big pep rally was quickly canceled as thoughts of the football game "suddenly became an unreal thing, as unreal as the death of the President itself" (Green, 2a). Much of the country's other football contests had already been called off as President Hannah contacted Illinois President David Henry and the athletic directors of both schools to make a decision.

Despite the requests of Michigan Governor George Romney and Illinois Governor Otto Kerner that the game be postponed (Burke, 2a), Hannah and his committee decided to play. Hannah's group had conferred with the Presidents of Michigan and Ohio State and together

they decided that both of their games should be played. In a joint statement credited to officials at both Michigan and Michigan State, the schools expressed their feelings that "it is in the best national interests and traditions to carry on, feeling that in so doing we are carrying out the wishes of our late President whose deep interest and concern for the physical training and welfare of our youth is so widely known" (Big Ten, 31). The New York Times paraphrased this statement to read that the justification for playing was that "the President would have wanted the games to go on" (Cady, 33). The actual press release from President Hannah was quite different. In the official rationale from Michigan State's President, the reason for playing was based upon the importance of the game and the difficulty in rescheduling around the Thanksgiving holiday and approaching final exams (Hannah). President Kennedy, his love of sport, or any type of dedication to his memory went unmentioned in this justification. It was announced that in recognition of the serious circumstances under which the game would be played, a "memorial service is being arranged to precede the game in which all of those attending will be asked to join. The usual pre-game and half-time program of entertainment by the band has been canceled" (Hannah). The message concluded with the resolution that the "decision is final, subject only to a request by President Johnson that all public events be canceled in this period of mourning" (Hannah). It was this rationale, in its entirety, which was reprinted in the Chicago Tribune, the largest circulating paper in the midwest (Set Ol', 1).

By 10:40 Saturday morning, President Johnson had made no such

extension of the mourning period, but the decision to play was reversed anyway. The Chicago Tribune announced that "Dr. John Hannah, president of Michigan State, called Coaches Pete Elliott of Illinois and Duffy Daugherty of Michigan State into his office early this [November 23] morning" and informed them of the decision (Fans Accept, 1). There was no formal announcement from President Hannah, although his assistant, James Denison, did say that the earlier postponement of the Michigan-Ohio State game had been a major factor. "We would have been playing the only major game east of the Mississippi," stated Denison, "We decided to postpone it to avoid criticism" (Duffy Will, 45). By Sunday, Hannah did speak to the press. He, too, pointed to the 9:15 a.m. postponement of the Michigan-Ohio State game. "Saturday morning we found ourselves in a different kind of climate," Hannah revealed. "What had seemed sensible and right the previous day now was definitely out of place in view of the family-type grief which has engulfed the entire nation" (Lyall Smith, 1d). Despite the earlier pleas by Governors Romney and Kerner to halt the game, Hannah denied that there was any kind of pressure placed on him, although reporter Lyall Smith wrote that Hannah "admitted that he had been bombarded with phone calls and telegrams during the night about the earlier decision to play the game as scheduled" (1d). According to reporter Pete Waldmeir, some of these messages went so far as to accuse Hannah of "dancing on Kennedy's grave" (1d). This did not stop columnists nationwide from speculating on what must have gone on behind the scenes to change Hannah's mind. D. Leo Monahan of the Boston Record American suggested that the Michigan State game was postponed "after,

you can bet, considerable heated telephone calls and political string-pulling and pressures" (54).

The Chicago Tribune reported that the cancelation "caught countless fans off guard who had made the trip from Illinois and other parts" (Fans Accept, 1). The Illinois Special, a train specifically used to transport fans to the game, had to be turned around at Battle Creek and reserved again for the new game date (Fans Accept, 1). Waldmeir reported that Michigan state troopers were on the roads intercepting anyone with an Illinois license plate to warn them of the game's cancelation (1d). Even with these efforts, Illinois Athletic Director Doug Mills' estimated that by the time the game's postponement was announced, about 4,000 Illinois supporters had already made the trip (Duffy Will, 45). Fortunately for University officials, these fans "accepted the postponement with understanding and left almost immediately for home" (Fans Accept, 1).

The game was rescheduled for just five days later, and to complicate things further, it happened to be Thanksgiving. Because of the short notice and holiday, fans experienced substantial difficulties trying to attend the next game, causing speculation that attendance would be hurt (Fans Accept, 1,4). The holiday also created a labor shortage for the rescheduled game, and a call for workers was printed in the local paper (Need Student, 7). Another complication was that dormitories, normally closed for Thanksgiving recess, now had to remain opened and staffed, and meals had to be prepared for the estimated 2,650 students who would now be staying for the game (Dorms, 1). The campus paper printed a story on its front page detailing the

thousands of dollars lost due to the postponement (Game Delay, 1). Michigan State ticket manager Bill Beardsley reported that he had to provide over 3,000 ticket refunds, but that most of these tickets were being resold (Empty Seats, 1c). It can also be safely assumed that the inconvenience of the timing, as well as the odd circumstances of the decision, upset a multitude of students and other fans while embarrassing officials of both universities.

The late cancelation fiasco also set off a firestorm of outrage, played out on the pages of the Michigan State News. An analysis of this exchange provides insight into how the public perceived Michigan State's positioning during the crisis weekend. After Monday's day of mourning, the paper's letter section was dominated by tributes to President Kennedy and letters expressing anger at the earlier decision to play. Sharon Mooney wrote that "even with the death of the President of the United States, some of the students, faculty, and administration thought a football game should still be played because it would determine who would take the bid for the Rose Bowl. Who cares about the Rose Bowl at a time like this!" (2). Faculty member Alvin D. Sokolow argued that the weekend's events suggested that the administration was more interested in attendance and the Big Ten title than with the President's murder, as "[o]nly this impression can be deduced from the weak justifications given late Friday in the original decision to go on with the game" (2).

Two staff-written editorials also appeared in Tuesday's paper. The first asked the question, "What should we have done?" (2). This article supported the notion that the game should have been played.

"We strongly disagree with the postponement of Saturday's game;" the article reads, "the national day of mourning was Monday, not Saturday" (2). The editorial continued by asking, "Must our respect of the late President consist only of perfunctory inactivity? The late President's memory and worth will live in our minds, where it should, not in the empty seats of Spartan Stadium" (2). Mourning is a state of mind, not immediately connected to physical place or activity. The stadium's emptiness served no purpose, suggesting that there was potential for the stadium, and the game, to participate as part of the healing process.

The second editorial dealt with the issue of freedom to disagree. Sue McCabe, in discussing the weekend's events, wrote that to "some students, nothing short of total halt [sic] to all campus functions is a satisfactory tribute to our late President. To others, a consideration of what the man stood for and a renewal of personal dedication" would be most meaningful (2). The article quoted both those who wished for all scheduled events to be canceled so that students could mourn in their own ways and those who did not want to shut down. One of those against shutting down was student government President Robert Kerr, who was quoted as saying, "Everyone is trying to outdo everyone else in vocal displays of grief. `I can mourn better than you' appears to be the prevailing sentiment. I don't see what good it did to call off the game" (McCabe, 2). Kerr critiqued the national shut down of society, questioning the sincerity of the trend. Mourning is to be for the good of the people -- a natural reaction to a traumatic experience as a start of the healing process -- not merely

a tribute performed because other people have done the same. Again, this comment suggests the potential for the game to be more useful in being played than in its cancelation or postponement. The article concludes by celebrating the notion that Kennedy governed in a free nation where differences were appreciated.

Wednesday's letter section began with another staff- written editorial. This one, entitled "So We Must Go On," emphasized that "time marches on and wounds, which seem enormous for a while, heal" (2). The article continued by recognizing that the game would not be the same as if it had been played earlier, for "[t]oo much has transpired since Friday afternoon and the significance of the big game has now been tempered by the days of mourning" (2). Still, the game could have a positive effect on the community. The editorial argued that "two squads of football players will demonstrate that things must go on. That while we mourn, we must continue living" (2). It seems that the Michigan State News recognized the positive impact that sport could have on a community and firmly supported the notion of playing the game during the crisis period. Unlike cancelation, playing the game could be interpreted as a way of adding meaning to a respectful tribute. Closing down brought nothing but silence and inactivity, while playing suggested continuity of life, the strength of society to continue under duress, the promise of a future despite the murder of the president, and an appropriate tribute by attending what Kennedy himself enjoyed.

The letters to the editor began just below this editorial. The majority of published letters did not share the same feelings as the

editorial staff. The very first letter, written by Professor Harm J. deBlij, was a response to the "What Should We Have Done" editorial of the previous day. Professor deBlij, who had just returned from Kennedy's funeral, was shocked at the paper's support for playing. "I fought to have the game postponed Saturday," deBlij stated, "and would have resigned from this University had it been held" (2). In response to the arguments put forth in the editorial, deBlij first countered with, "A national day of mourning should not have to be proclaimed; it should be the spontaneous reaction to a disaster. It should cause us not to want to play the game; do we have to be told when and when not to mourn?" (2). deBlij continued from there to argue that the University should have led the way in showing respect for a fallen leader by canceling the game, rather than being one of the last to cancel (2). deBlij also mentioned Hannah's justification, pointing out how strange it was that the President first claimed that there was no other day to play the game, and then found one (2). deBlij closed by expressing his disbelief that "the thinking students here feel otherwise" (2), placing supporters of the game on the side of the unthinking.

Authors of the next letters continued to echo deBlij's sentiment's. Dan Katz opened by repeating the argument that Michigan State should have taken a leadership role by canceling the game immediately. Katz also argued that "You state that the national day of mourning was Monday, not Saturday. That is true, but it does not mean that we should be cheering and happy on the day after the assassination of the President" (2). Leonard and Joy Efron were

shocked and angered that officials "decided that a football game was more important than affording President Kennedy the final respect we could" (2). They concluded with "we are very much appalled and ashamed to be associated with a University where the smell of roses is more important than morality" (2). Note how the author separated victory and morality, unable to conceive of a game played in honor of Kennedy. Donald E. Dickson responded to the editorial and to student government President Kerr by saying "I hope the inactivity that gripped the nation was imposed by its grief and was not just perfunctory .... I am quite sure that the competitiveness and spirit necessary for this game would have been much more perfunctory" (2). Stephen E. Savage wrote in to accuse the Michigan State News editors of having "a disgustingly shallow concept of the nature of mourning" and to comment that "only those who could not grasp the tragedy or those that know not the meaning of respect could have cheered at a football game in the circumstances we have all faced" (2).

The dialogue opened up by the administration's decision and the newspaper's editorials clearly demonstrated people's anger at the game situation, with many arguments squarely aimed at President Hannah's justification for playing. Because Hannah's comments resonate so clearly in these letters, it is clear that the game was a focal point in the lives of many. Despite the tragedy, people followed the dialogue surrounding the sport attentively and reacted to it. In this particular case, the reaction was one of anger, due to a number of extenuating circumstances. It would not be a great leap to suggest, however, that if Hannah and the Michigan State administration had

presented the meaning of the game more appropriately, as more of a tribute to Kennedy, then these sentiments may well have resonated throughout the letters page. The support for a more active form of memorialization was present in the community, as was made apparent in the newspaper editorials. This opportunity was missed, however, as the rationale for playing did not promote the memorialization and healing potential of the football game.

Among Wednesday's letters of protest was one lone voice in support of playing the football game. Written by Lawrence Murray, the letter claimed that the vocal majority of students upset by the game were ignoring the minority who desired the game to be played. The author quoted various students from the campus who were upset with the postponement, including a residential advisor who "noticed an initial response of sympathy from the men; but that soon changed to bitterness when the game was postponed" (2). While Murray argued that "this minority is a minority of great numbers rather than a handful" (2), the ratio of letters published does not support him.

The final letters against football appeared in the Monday, December 2 issue of the Michigan State News. Henry Semczak was happy the game was moved, as people would have been in no mood to cheer, but expressed anger over the way it was done. "An earlier announcement was definitely in order. Many unknowing fans traveled long distances in adverse weather conditions to see the contest" (2). The last letter, from Gary W. Coats, argued that Kennedy never shrank away from responsibility, even under the danger of assassination, yet "some feel it is too much to sacrifice even a football game to pay him our

respect" (2). This, of course, did not consider how continuing the game could have stood as a representation of, and a tribute to, Kennedy's sense of responsibility and "never back down" attitude. Coats added that ceasing all weekend activities was not only an outward expression of feelings, but it also allowed for personal refection on personal values and how to contribute to the nation, and "self-examination would be very difficult amidst 76,000 cheering fans" (2). Again, football was reduced to nothing more than a trivial occurrence with no meaningful potential. The widely held belief was that as a football game, it could serve only to entertain without any redeeming value during the crisis.

The mass public outcry over the Michigan State football game appears to have been accentuated by two occurrences. First, there was the on-again, off-again nature of the game. Second, as the letters to the editor revealed, there was an inadequate justification provided for playing. These two factors played a prevalent role in the public discussion of the weekend's events. Perhaps President Hannah's detailed rationale, based on the logistics of time, was perceived by many as cold, calculated, and much too pragmatic to be accepted under the emotionally strained circumstances of the Kennedy assassination. Hannah's reactions were completely out of step with the reactions of other social institutions such as the government and the media. While those groups provided the nation with messages of comfort and tribute while taking action throughout the crisis weekend, Hannah tried to justify his institution's continuation based upon self-interest with little regard to the tragedy. Clearly, Hannah and the others were

thinking of the game solely for its entertainment function and had no conception of how the game might serve as a vehicle of epideictic discourse.

Conclusion

In contrast to the reaction to the football game, a concert held on Michigan State's campus Sunday afternoon, the day after the game was supposed to occur, continued unprotested. Perhaps this was due in part to classical music being held in higher regard as a cultural form than sport, and in part to Dean Paul A. Varg's rationale for continuing the event. Varg justified the event by quoting from the Gettysburg Address and adding, "In this hour of sorrow over the death of John Fitzgerald Kennedy we have no Lincoln, so Beethoven must speak for us" (Orchestra, 1). Music was allowed to speak for people, to interpret their feelings, but sport was not granted the same opportunity. If the game had gone ahead as originally scheduled, rationalized with arguments based on tribute and emotions, as the Beethoven concert had been, the Illinois-Michigan State contest may have been played without excessive controversy or the substantial problems otherwise encountered.

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